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Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the United Nations University: enhancing its relevance and effectiveness

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "United Nations University: enhancing its relevance and effectiveness" (A/53/392).

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Annex

Comments of the Secretary-General on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The United Nations University: enhancing its relevance and effectiveness"

Introduction

1. The purpose of the report prepared by the Joint Inspection Unit is to seek to enhance the relevance and improve the effectiveness of the United Nations University, (UNU), which was established in 1973 by the United Nations General Assembly as an international community of scholars addressing pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare through research, postgraduate training and dissemination of knowledge. The recommendations are meant to assist the University in asserting its distinctive academic image and visibility within the United Nations system and the broad world of scholarship. To date, the University has performed its basic mandates reasonably well, but not without constraints and challenges. This record of achievements, however, is not perceived by the University's major stake-holders within and outside the United Nations system as having fulfilled the high expectations attached to the creation of this unique institution within the international community.

2. The report focuses on issues of governance and accountability of UNU and reviews the University's institutional framework, its programme planning and implementation arrangements, as well as the relevance and practical impact of its outputs, with a view to enhancing its potential more fully as a strategic intellectual resource for the multilateral system of cooperation and to further strengthen its capacity to respond to the emerging or uncharted challenges of the next century. The Inspectors have made a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing the University's overall performance capabilities and credibility which, if implemented, they believe will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of UNU from the vantage point of the United Nations system. They call, *inter alia*, for a revitalization of the strategic management and coordination role of the University Centre at Tokyo, a reinforcement of the institutional cohesion among its different outreach centres and programmes, a more coherent policy framework for programme development and implementation and the formulation and enforcement of common programme quality standards for all its components. In particular, the Inspectors call for the streamlining of the existing governance system and processes and for a greater focus on the substance and results of the University's work.

3. The authors note that the report coincided with several important changes within the University itself and in the United Nations system. These included a series of reform measures introduced by UNU, the restructuring efforts of the Secretary-General, which have equipped the Secretariat with new decision-making tools that provide new opportunities for improved interaction between United Nations headquarters and UNU, and a renewal of leadership in a number of organizations of the United Nations system. The Inspectors believe that these changes present a major opportunity for the Rector of UNU to implement the mandate and programmes of UNU more effectively with the new perspectives and strategic direction of the United Nations community.

4. The report is also based on the views expressed by a broad spectrum of United Nations system officials, especially at the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as by the heads of research institutes of the system, during the Inspectors' consultations with officials in those organizations.

5. In preparing the present comments, the Secretary-General has taken into account the views of the management of UNU as well as of the Director-General of UNESCO, with whom he has held consultations.

General comments

6. The Secretary-General welcomes the report of the Joint Inspection Unit. Its issuance takes place at a time when the United Nations is engaged in a sustained long-term effort of reform and renewal intended to give it a greater unity of purpose and coherence of efforts and to enhance its capacity to respond to the demands of an increasingly complex world. One of these challenges is for the United Nations to harness the potential of scientific knowledge and policy analysis to enhance the quality of intergovernmental decision-making and processes and the work of the Organization. It was in this spirit that the Secretary-General, in his report to the General Assembly entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950), noted that the United Nations system had developed a considerable capacity for policy analysis and research through a network of

autonomous research institutes that included the United Nations University. It was his view, however, that their overall contribution and potential remained largely underutilized by the United Nations community.

7. The Secretary-General accordingly shares fully the rationale of the Inspectors' report which is "to make UNU an integral part of the United Nations renewal process; to explore ways by which its potential could be realized more fully as a strategic intellectual resource for the multilateral system of cooperation; and finally, to strengthen its alert reflexes with regard to the emerging or uncharted challenges of the next century."[1] The Secretary-General also wishes to observe that the mandate of the University, as stipulated in its Charter, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 3081 (XXVIII) of 6 December 1973, extends beyond the role of think-tank for the United Nations and also includes the promotion of the continuing growth of vigorous academic and scientific communities everywhere, particularly in the developing countries. Thus, the report of the Joint Inspection Unit focuses on only one aspect, albeit an important one, of the overall mandate of the Charter of the University.

8. It is also the view of the Secretary-General that the United Nations University can best perform the key functions referred to by the Inspectors (see para. 7 above) if two requirements are observed. First, the United Nations University and other similar bodies such as the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development need to be allowed to pursue their research activities with a degree of autonomy and intellectual rigour. At the same time however, these institutions also have an obligation to make their work both relevant and accessible to the United Nations community. The Secretary-General attaches great importance to ensuring that UNU is contributing effectively to the work of the United Nations system. In this regard, the Secretary-General wishes to recall that in both a previous and a current report to the General Assembly, reference has been made to the important progress being made in strengthening UNU collaboration and interfacing with the United Nations over the past few years (A/51/324 and A/53/408).

9. It should also be noted that the University and its governing body (the Council) have stressed enhanced relations with the United Nations as a key policy objective while preserving the autonomy of the University within the framework of the United Nations. Substantive interactions between UNU and the United Nations are expanding significantly, mainly through the provision of academic inputs in support of United Nations intergovernmental deliberative and decision-making processes and increased participation and contributions to the activities and work of the United Nations. The Secretary-General also notes that the University under its new senior management is working to strengthen its cooperation with other United Nations organizations and with Governments. Furthermore, future collaboration with other organizations of the system is being pursued in connection with the development of the University's strategic plan for 1999-2002. Since the issuance of the Secretary-General's reform proposals in July 1997 and, in particular, in the context of the establishment and launching of the Strategic Planning Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, intensive consultations have been conducted with UNU senior management on ways and means to enhance further the contribution of the United Nations University to the work of the Secretariat and the deliberations of intergovernmental bodies.

Comments on the recommendations

Recommendation 1. Directives of the United Nations General Assembly

The Rector/Council of the United Nations University should report, through the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to the General Assembly on specific actions taken to implement the directives of the General Assembly, as part of the periodic reports on the work of the University

10. The Secretary-General supports this recommendation. The report of the Council of the University is made available to the General Assembly. In its consideration of the agenda item 96 (a), entitled "Training and research: United Nations University", at its fifty-third session, the General Assembly has the opportunity to make recommendations in this regard.

Recommendation 2. Executive Board of UNESCO

The Executive Board of UNESCO may wish to encourage enhanced programmatic collaboration between UNU and UNESCO, by way of joint programming and implementation of activities of mutual interest, including more systematic sharing of programme and institutional networks, in particular within the existing framework of UNITWIN (University Twinning)/UNESCO Chairs Programme

11. The Secretary-General supports this recommendation and wishes to inform the General Assembly that it is already being implemented. Moreover, it is the view of UNESCO that the collaboration between UNU and UNESCO will probably be strengthened as a result of the outcome of the

World Conference on Higher Education, to be held at UNESCO headquarters, in Paris, from 5 to 9 October 1998.

Recommendation 3. University Council and boards

(a) Without prejudice to the academic autonomy of UNU and the intellectual independence and integrity required of UNU Council members, Council composition should be reviewed to reflect more fully the diversity of its major stake-holders and partners, which include the academic community, Governments, United Nations system organizations and the private sector;

(b) At the same time, to ensure a leaner and more cost-effective Council, the possibility should be considered of reducing its current membership, coupled with the consolidation of the Council's sessional main committees into two (basically programme and budget committees), and the latter could be assisted by a small advisory group open to interested government representatives and other stake-holders of the University;

(c) Boards of the UNU research and training centres and Programmes (RTC/Ps) should help ensure coherent and cost-effective programme activities by the respective RTC/Ps along the general policies formulated by the Council. However, the size of the boards should be kept to a minimum and an option of biennial board meetings could be considered to further reduce institutional costs.

12. The question of the composition of the UNU Council needs to be examined with some caution. The members of the Council are appointed jointly by the Secretary-General and the Director-General of UNESCO. Both appointing authorities see it as essential that the core expertise of Council members be in academic disciplines and in the application of science to ongoing societal problems. At the same time, they have been mindful of ensuring that Council members bring concurrent, additional expertise from the diplomatic, non-governmental and government service communities and the United Nations. In line with the UNU Charter, Council members are thus selected on a broad basis with due regard to geographical distribution, gender, disciplinary balance and professional experience. In this context, the Secretary-General notes that over one third of the members of the Council since its establishment have held senior United Nations or governmental positions.

13. The Secretary-General sees some advantage to improving representation in the Council by including non-governmental organizations, the media and members of the business community. Given the size of UNU, including the wide and varying range of its programmatic areas, the number of members of the Council (28) does not seem to be excessive. Furthermore, the membership of the Council is mandated by the UNU Charter, and any change would therefore require an amendment to the Charter. Against this background, the Secretary-General does not see a specific need for an advisory group, as suggested by the Inspectors in recommendation 3 (b). The Secretary-General believes that it is possible to address the concerns of the Inspectors within the framework of the UNU Charter and existing structures and procedures and through a better structured framework for cooperation and consultation between UNU and its various constituencies. Nevertheless, the Secretary-General will keep this issue under continuing review and will also ask the management of UNU and senior colleagues in UNESCO to do likewise.

14. Since full financial authority is vested in the Council by the UNU Charter, the Council will be in the best position to address the issue of the cost-effectiveness of its operation.

15. The Secretary-General agrees with the recommendation that the size of the boards of UNU research and training centres and programmes should be kept to a minimum and that the University should endeavour to ensure the most cost-effective means for convening annual board meetings. Attention should also be drawn to the fact that these boards are specialized bodies. Their authority derives from the UNU governing Council and their functions are mostly advisory. They should not therefore be confused with the governing authority of the UNU Council. They play an integral role in providing expert advice and quality assurance in the selection of programmes. Through them, the University can access greater intellectual and financial resources and increase its visibility and presence worldwide. In addition, they meet only once a year, in time to ensure effective and expert input into the Council's annual session, in December.

Recommendation 4. University Centre (UNU Headquarters, Tokyo)

As part of the measures necessary to revitalize/redefine the role of the University Centre:

(a) The University Centre, while taking the lead in strategic planning processes, should refocus its own research functions mainly on "synthesis" or interdisciplinary and global integration of research findings emanating from within and outside the University;

(b) The University Centre should exercise more effective managerial oversight over the personnel, administrative, budgetary and financial matters within

the UNU system as a whole, on the basis of transparent policies;

(c) Furthermore, the University Centre, assisted by RTC/Ps, should aim to serve as a think-tank for the United Nations system through closer functional cooperation with the relevant United Nations system organizations.

16. The Secretary-General supports all three aspects of the recommendation. Bearing in mind the fact that UNU also carries out fundamental research and capacity-building activities as called for in its Charter, the Secretary-General agrees that the University as a whole should endeavour to enhance its policy research functions with particular attention to the synthesis or interdisciplinary and global integration of research findings emanating from within and outside the University. In this regard, the Secretary-General intends to initiate consultations with the University with a view to developing mutually reinforcing linkages with the Strategic Planning Unit within the Office of the Secretary-General and other relevant departments of the United Nations Secretariat. In this regard, in 1998, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and UNU have been collaborating in the issuance of joint publications and the organization of special panel discussions and round-tables and other special events on topical social and economic issues. An appropriate mechanism will need to be established for more systematic substantive collaboration, particularly on research topics that relate to policy issues before the General Assembly and for which the United Nations Secretariat has responsibility for analysis and reporting.

17. It is the understanding of the Secretary-General that the UNU Council is fully cognizant of the issues raised by the Inspectors in these recommendations. In addition, the Secretary-General also believes that a codified system of administrative rules and procedures specifically developed for the University would establish a basis for prudent and effective management, taking into account the special characteristics of the University. Participation of the UNU in the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (both components – Personnel and General Administrative Questions, and Financial and Budgetary Questions) will greatly assist the management of UNU in developing this system of rules. Also, the Department of Management of the Secretariat can be of assistance in this regard.

Recommendation 5. Research and training centres and Programmes

(a) The UNU Council and the Rector should take fuller advantage of the physical proximity of the UNU/IAS (Institute of Advanced Studies) to the University Centre by ensuring enhanced collaboration and coordination between the two institutions in administrative and programme areas;

(b) The capacities of RTC/Ps in the developing countries should be built progressively to the level of those of RTC/Ps in the developed countries;

(c) Pending mobilization of additional resources, consideration should be given to establishing UNU/BIOLAC (Biotechnology Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuela) as a fully fledged RTC so that UNU may have at least one such centre on each continent;

(d) Subject to the above (subpara. (c)), less emphasis should be placed, for the time being, on the establishment or incorporation of new RTC/Ps in favour of an expanded and active network of associated institutions.

18. The Secretary-General shares the view that it would be desirable for the University to have a balanced and more equitable institutional presence in all continents of the world. However, the establishment of fully fledged university centres can only proceed, in accordance with the general policies of the UNU Council, with the assurance of sustained financial resources. Furthermore, the Secretary-General notes that while several centres and programmes of the University are located in developed countries, the emphasis and focus of their research and capacity-building activities is on the problems of developing countries.

Recommendation 6. Cooperating institutions

The different agreements governing UNU cooperation with other institutions constituting the University's networks should be standardized as may be necessary to ensure consistent quality norms and approaches to network-building in the most effective manner.

19. The Secretary-General believes that to ensure the quality of the work of the University, it should be able, in open and flexible ways, to cooperate and work effectively with a variety of different institutions. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the University develop a set of flexible procedures for engaging in its programmes different institutions located around the world. It will be important,

however, to keep under review the different categories of agreements the University uses in order to ensure consistent forms and approaches.

Recommendation 7. General policy framework, programme coordination and implementation

(a) The existing policy framework (including in particular the "strategic plan" in preparation) for programme planning, implementation and evaluation should be developed into a detailed UNU manual of programme policies and procedures. Furthermore, in order to ensure implementation of such policies and procedures, an evaluation and monitoring system should be established at the University Centre;

(b) While the University Centre should fully exercise its responsibility for programme planning and strategic management, coordination within specific programme areas of the University could be performed as a shared endeavour by all UNU entities on the basis of their institutional specialization;

(c) UNU should also strive for working more effectively with other institutional partners within and outside the United Nations system at the country and regional levels, thereby helping to concentrate its limited resources on activities with a global and interdisciplinary dimension;

(d) With a view to enhancing interaction and collaboration in programme matters between UNU and other organizations within the United Nations system, the Secretary-General should take action to make UNU a fully fledged member of ACC.

20. The Secretary-General is basically in agreement with this recommendation. It is his view that the strategic plan now being developed by the University, which provides for a more standardized planning and assessment system, will contribute significantly to addressing the first three aspects of the recommendation. With regard to the issue of full membership of UNU in ACC, the Secretary-General would like to recall that membership in ACC is open to specialized agencies and funds and programmes of the United Nations. However, arrangements are currently in place for the participation of UNU in ACC and its subsidiary bodies.

21. In response to the interest expressed by the UNU Council in the possibility of UNU participation in ACC, ACC at its second regular session of 1996 decided on arrangements for UNU to be invited to be represented in the consultative and inter-agency committees comprising the subsidiary machinery of ACC. As far as ACC itself was concerned, it was agreed that arrangements would be made to inform UNU of the Committee's work programme so as to enable the University to indicate whether the agenda of any given session included an item to which UNU, in view of the research and related activities it has conducted, would have an especially important contribution to make. Discussions in ACC could likewise assist the University in formulating research initiatives that could be of particular importance to the United Nations system. In that light, the Secretary-General would recommend to ACC the participation of the Rector of the University in the relevant discussions in ACC. Provision would also be made for periodic consultations between the Rector and ACC members, which would serve to maximize the contribution of UNU to the work of the system. The Secretary-General believes that these arrangements will allow for the effective participation of the University in the work of ACC.

Recommendation 8. Capacity-building

In order to enhance academic capacity-building, including training and fellowships, in particular in the developing countries, UNU should devote more attention to the development of different innovative forms of capacity-building and should, to the extent possible, reduce overall meeting costs by making more effective use of current and emerging information and communications technologies. In this context, curriculum development as pursued at present by UNU/IIST (International Institute for Software Technology, Macau) and UNU/INWEH (International Network on Water, Environment and Health, Canada) should be emulated progressively by other parts of UNU, in close collaboration with UNESCO.

22. The Secretary-General recognizes that the Charter of the University places great emphasis on capacity-building as part of the overall mandate given to the University, and he therefore fully agrees with the recommendation of the Inspectors that more resources should be allocated to those type of activities. At the same time, the Secretary-General would like to point out that other organizations of the United Nations system are involved in several aspects of capacity-building (for example, the United Nations Development Programme, the International Telecommunication Union and the International Labour Organization) and UNU should collaborate more closely with them in addressing this aspect of its mandate.

Recommendation 9. Dissemination

(a) UNU should formulate and ensure effective implementation of a unified publications policy and programme, including uniform publications quality standards for all its institutional components;

(b) Dissemination activities should be targeted more deliberately and systematically to the United Nations system intergovernmental policy and normative processes.

23. The Secretary-General supports the proposal that UNU dissemination activities should be targeted more to intergovernmental policy processes of the United Nations system. This is an issue that can be addressed effectively within the ACC machinery, where modalities for its implementation can be formulated. Meetings of ACC subsidiary bodies are often the forums where agencies actually agree on, and commit themselves to, the preparation of inputs for the Secretary-General's reports and background papers for specific intergovernmental meetings. The University itself is also fully seized of this issue, and seeks to disseminate its work not only to the academic community but also within the United Nations system.

Recommendation 10. Financial resources and management

(a) The Secretary-General, assisted by the UNU Rector, is invited to initiate consultations, at an appropriate time in future, with contributors to the Endowment Fund with a view to securing their agreement to the central management of the income from the Fund in conformity with article II, paragraph 1, of the University Charter, and for the benefit of more coherent and integrated operations of the UNU system as a whole;

(b) Pending the above (subpara. (a)), UNU should enhance its efforts to make optimal use of the available financial resources in more innovative and transparent ways, by taking duly into account recommendation 8. At the same time, UNU should explore with potential donors the possibility of "linked" funding, by which a fixed percentage of contributions made to a UNU entity in a developed country would be provided to another UNU entity in a developing country;

(c) The United Nations General Assembly may wish to consider the possibility of adding UNU to the list of organizations eligible for participation in the United Nations Pledging Conference, held annually.

24. The Secretary-General recognizes the importance of the Endowment Fund for ensuring the future financial viability of UNU. Current arrangements for the central management of the Endowment Fund have been working well and take into account the delicate balance between recognizing the interests of donor countries and those of recipient entities. Furthermore, UNU has the obligation to respect the agreements it has entered into voluntarily with Governments. He nevertheless believes that maintaining a dialogue with current and future contributors is essential for the continued donation and effective management of funds. He further believes that, in the light of the desire to bring about greater parity among regions in the location of the UNU institutions, the University should explore with potential donors the possibility of linked funding. The Secretary-General stands ready to assist UNU in its efforts to implement the recommendation.

25. The question of adding UNU to the list of organizations eligible for participation in the United Nations Pledging Conference for Development Activities is a matter that needs to be taken up directly by the General Assembly. Should the Assembly decide to authorize the inclusion of UNU in the list of organizations eligible for participation in the Pledging Conference, it is unlikely, however, that such a decision would be effective for the 1998 Pledging Conference. The University would be included, however, in the Pledging Conference for 1999, if the General Assembly so recommends.

Recommendation 11. Common premises and services

The Secretary-General, in keeping with his drive to achieve common premises and services for the United Nations system organizations located at the same duty stations, should enable United Nations system entities based in Tokyo to relocate, where applicable, to the University premises and to develop common services and facilities.

26. The Secretary-General supports the proposal and believes that its implementation will contribute to the realization of his reform proposals regarding common premises.

Notes

[1] JIU/REP/98/3, para. 4; transmitted to the members of the General Assembly by a note by the Secretary-General (A/53/392).